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The northern and northwestern suburbs stand to lose millions of federal transportation dollars for mass transit projects, such as Metra's proposed suburban STAR Line and other commuter rail projects, unless the state is able to come up with matching dollars for mass transit.

At a press conference in Chicago on Tuesday, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, of Highland Park, warned that the current political gridlock in Springfield is threatening federal mass transit funding. Kirk was joined by U.S. Rep. Melissa Bean, D-8th, of Barrington, and a bipartisan group of state lawmakers and local officials.

"The state legislature plans to meet Dec. 17 and unless they come up with bipartisan plan for mass transit, Illinois stands to lose and California, Florida and Texas stand to win," said Kirk. "If the state of Illinois can't come up matching funds, they will give our transportation money to other states."

Kirk said several crucial Metra expansion projects have been indefinitely put on hold because of the transportation funding stalemate in Springfield, and the lack of state matching funds.

"The political gridlock in Springfield is now jeopardizing everything we want in Washington," said Kirk, in a telephone interview after the meeting. "Illinois was the state that did best in the federal transportation bill, but in order to unlock federal funds, you generally have to come up with a one-third match.

"Because the state of Illinois currently has no plans to match federal funds, we could lose up to \$1.5 billion, and this particularly hurts Metra and its expansion plans," he said.

Preliminary engineering work has been halted on Metra's proposed new STAR line, which would link many of the northwest and western suburbs to O'Hare International Airport and downtown, with the possibility for eventual expansion of the rail line into Lake County.

"As suburban communities continue to grow, the STAR Line will be required to prevent crippling traffic congestion," said Kirk. "The lack of matching funds for Metra's projects will delay or end the hopes of commuters to see improvements."

"The populations in our suburban districts are booming, offsetting the decline in population in the city," Bean said. "Illinois jobs and growth are dependent on suburban infrastructure. That's why Congressman Kirk and I are here today to urge our state leaders to find a workable solution that would provide the necessary matching funds to the federal grants already secured by the Illinois delegation."

Engineering work also has been halted on a project to improve a key rail intersection in Chicago, where several rail lines cross including the Union Pacific West, Milwaukee District West, Milwaukee District North and the North Central Service.

The rail intersection needs to be modernized to alleviate bottlenecks and increase the number of trains that can move through that area during rush hour, according to Metra spokesperson Judy Pardonnet.

Other projects that would be impacted include the future expansion of the Union Pacific Northwest Line, which runs from Chicago to McHenry County and serves Arlington Heights, Palatine and other northwest suburbs.